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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: LAYING GROUNDWORK FOR SUCCESSFUL MERCY DEPLOYMENT
IN COTABATO

REF: A. MANILA 141
[1](#)B. 06 MANILA 4656

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: During an April 9 visit to Cotabato City, in the southern Philippines, the DCM, Mercy U.S. Navy Commander Speight, DATT, and D/PolCouns consulted with senior officials from the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), Cotabato City, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) regarding the upcoming visit of the USNS Mercy. The DCM highlighted the importance of the Mercy visit to the U.S.-Philippine partnership; the Mercy's humanitarian mission to provide medical care to tens of thousands of Filipinos; Mercy personnel's intention to train and learn from hundreds of Philippine doctors and other medical personnel; and the Mercy's overarching goal to help bring peace and prosperity to this conflict-affected area. Officials were grateful for and focused on the Mercy deployment. They appreciated the opportunity to share their thoughts, as well as to share ownership and credit, for a successful Mercy Mission, including with local media. End Summary.

Bringing the Message to the Patients

[1](#)2. (U) In meetings with government and local officials in Cotabato City in the southern Philippines April 9, the DCM laid the groundwork for a smooth USNS Mercy visit May 29 - June 14. He emphasized that the Mercy visit reflected the strong historical friendship between our respective countries and the importance of partnerships, not only with Philippine national and local government officials, but also with NGOs and community organizations. The DCM underscored the humanitarian nature of the mission and its goal of reaching tens of thousands of poor Filipinos with medical care. The DCM pointed out that the effect of the Mercy mission would long outlast the visit, as hundreds of Filipino doctors and other medical personnel would receive needed hands-on training. The DCM expressed the hope that the Mercy visit would play a positive role in helping bring peace and prosperity to this conflict-affected area. Finally, the DCM expressed appreciation for the tremendous amount of work involved from local officials and from the Armed Forces of the Philippines. U.S. Navy Commander Robert Speight, advance team leader for the Mercy visit who accompanied the DCM, provided details of the deployment.

"A Great Thing for the People"

[1](#)3. (SBU) Ghazali Jaafar, Vice-Chairman of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), was enthusiastic, showing keen interest and expressing "heartfelt" gratitude for the Mercy mission. As if to underscore the need for the DCM's outreach

visit, Jaafar lamented that some uninformed people in the hinterlands believed U.S.-provided medicine was "poisonous," and he eagerly agreed to convey the humanitarian nature of the mission to constituents. "This is a great thing for the people," he said. He was thoroughly engaged in details and asked numerous questions about project coordination, Mercy capabilities, and site selection, and even suggested that security at one particular site could be problematic. (Planners subsequently removed the site from further consideration.) Cotabato City Mayor Muslimin Sema, whose recent election as Chairman of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) has been controversial, was equally appreciative and engaged in details. Noting that the elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) were scheduled for August, he expressed hope that the Mercy visit would not be used by some officials for political gain.

"You Listened to Us"

¶4. (U) During a February 20, 2008, meeting at the U.S. Embassy, Governor Zaldy Ampatuan and other senior officials from the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao had stressed the need for U.S. officials to consult locally prior to undertaking major exercises. Noting that the DCM's visit was exactly the kind of consultation they had requested, they offered their unconditional assistance in "getting the message out" and in any other way necessary. They also noted with some delight that during the 2006 Mercy visit to the Philippines, they had traveled to Manila to request that the Mercy visit include their region (ref B). Said ARMM Attorney General Frances Guiani, "You listened to us, and the Mercy is coming to our region."

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Comment

¶5. (SBU) Much coordination and planning had already been done at working levels by personnel from Mercy, JSOTF-P, JUSMAG, USAID, and State. The DCM's visit and visible consultations with senior local leaders allowed them to share ownership and credit for the upcoming Mercy deployment. Local leaders began speaking to the media during the DCM's visit. We believe this augurs very well for a successful media campaign and deployment.
KENNEY